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LIVING IN | POMONA, N.Y.

A Country Village Caught Up in the Times

By ELSA BRENNER

IN the 40 years that Anthony Occhipinti, the owner of Stop Realty, has been selling homes in the Rockland County village of Pomona, he has witnessed the demise of a bucolic way of life with mixed feelings.

As a developer of condominiums and a real estate broker, Mr. Occhipinti has profited. But as a longtime resident, he said, he has been sad to see much of the countryside disappear from the foothills of the Ramapo Mountains.

In the early and mid-1900s, Pomona was so untouched by the rush of development elsewhere that show business types like Charlie Chaplin, Paulette Goddard, Burgess Meredith, Alan Jay Lerner and Sophie Tucker sought it out as a refuge from the limelight.

Today Pomona, named for the Roman goddess of fruit trees and gardens, is a far busier place. Strip malls line the main thoroughfares, a steady stream of traffic threads through the side roads, and palatial new homes, some topping 7,000 square feet, loom over the horizon, commanding dramatic views of the mountainside and the Hudson River below.

"You bet I miss the farms and apple orchards, and how everybody used to know each other," Mr. Occhipinti said.

Only a relatively small part of untouched landscape still exists, some of it within a 2.43-square-mile incorporated section of Pomona that has only one streetlight, as well as zoning laws limiting new construction to one-family homes on lots one acre or larger. Now that section, too, is under siege: a religious group is suing for the right to build a rabbinical college on 130 undeveloped acres.

The zoning went into effect in the late 1960s, when residents faced with a development proposal for high-density apartment-type units acted to protect at least a part of Pomona — part of which is in the town of Ramapo, part in Haverstraw. They enacted strict zoning in the incorporated area, leaving those who would build apartments and condominiums, among them

Mr. Occhipinti, to restrict their efforts to the surrounding unincorporated area.

Last spring, the Congregation Rabbinical College of Tartikov in Manhattan initiated legal action by filing a complaint against the incorporated village in Federal District Court in White Plains, accusing it of a history of discrimination against Hasidism, an ultra-Orthodox branch of Judaism.

Rebutting that, Mayor Nicholas Sanderson of the incorporated village, which has 2,726 residents, said last week that "it is disingenuous to call anyone in the village anti-Semitic."

"In this little village," he added, "we have three houses of worship, including a Methodist church, a Hindu temple and a Zoroastrian temple, and I call that pretty inclusive."

What You'll Find

About 35 miles north of New York City, just off the Palisades Interstate Parkway, Pomona offers a variety of housing, including a '70s-era development of contemporary single-family homes with atriums; newer, larger homes on the higher elevations; and clusters of condos and apartment houses, including Avalon Crystal Hill, a five-story gated luxury rental complex.

Pomona — both incorporated and unincorporated — takes up almost all of the ZIP code 10970. It covers 11.7 square miles and has 9,222 residents, according to the most recent census figures.

On the municipal level, Pomona has two sets of masters, one in Ramapo and the other in Haverstraw. Even the incorporated village is planted in both towns.

For Maria and Tom Pali, who have lived in Pomona for seven years and recently moved into a new four-bedroom colonial on an acre of land, "it was a matter falling in love with Pomona and some of the beautiful scenery that still exists around here, and still being so close to everything," said Mrs. Pali, who commutes to Midtown Manhattan for work. She is a project manager for a janitorial service, and her husband manages a local pizzeria.

What You'll Pay

The median price for a single-family home in the ZIP code 10970 is \$599,000; for a two-bedroom condo, the median is \$254,900. Five years ago, the median was \$375,000 for a single-family house, \$165,000 for a condo.

Currently on the market, a 58-year-old four-bedroom ranch on a 1.7-acre lot has an asking

price of \$375,000, down from the original asking price of \$499,900. Taxes for the house are \$8,243 a year.

A four-bedroom colonial built in 1991 on a 0.47-acre lot is listed for \$575,000, down from its original asking price of \$639,000. Taxes are \$11,193.

At the high end of the market, a new Mediterranean-style stucco house with five bedrooms on an acre is going for \$1.55 million, down from its original asking price of \$1.6 million. Taxes on that home have yet to be determined.

The drop in the asking prices on all three properties indicates a market that has slowed considerably, said Marisa Chaplin, a broker with Century 21 Grand in Pomona.

To encourage sales, her agency is offering property auctions. "They can go the traditional way of selling and pay a commission," Ms. Chaplin said, "or agree to an upfront marketing fee and we'll arrange the auction."

If a seller decides to put a property up for auction, he or she typically pays a fee of 1 percent of the reserve price (the lowest price the seller is willing to accept). "We're responding to the current real estate market in our area," said Jeffrey Stern, a Century 21 partner. "It's a good way of getting the best price in a short amount of time."

Mr. Stern added: "There are homeowners who don't want their house to be on the market for two and three and four months and go through the showing and bidding process. These are motivated sellers who want to sell to qualified buyers and not waste time."

Local developers, too, are resorting to auctions. One of them, JWL Construction, engaged a company called Express Auction this year to liquidate its remaining 13 lots and 2 luxury homes in the Highgate Estates development.

But however slow the market is now, compared with the one that Mr. Occhipinti first knew some 25 years ago, Pomona's values have soared. Houses that once sold for \$21,000 now fetch \$500,000, despite the current doldrums, he noted, adding that longtime residents have fared well.

What to Do

For outdoor enthusiasts, the incorporated village of Pomona has three recreational areas, including Burgess Meredith Park, which has, among other things, a basketball court, an exercise trail, a ball field and paths winding by Minisceongo Creek for peaceful meditation.

Nearby Bear Mountain State Park offers ice skating, sledding and cross-country ski trails in the winter.

Countywide, Rockland has 2,579 acres of parkland. Betty Reynolds, a nurse practitioner who has lived in Pomona for more than 20 years, is a runner who trains for marathons several times a week along the Hudson River and around Rockland Lake in Nyack.

Pomona residents are within 15 minutes of major shopping malls in Nanuet and the Palisades Center Mall in Nyack. Locally, the Pacesetter Mall on Route 202 has small retail shops and a supermarket.

For dining, Ms. Reynolds and her boyfriend, Albert Istorico, frequent the Red Rock Café in nearby Garnerville, known for its stuffed artichokes, or the Runcible Spoon Bakery in Nyack, for coffee and muffins.

The Schools

Because of the overlayed municipal boundaries, Pomona residents are in two public school districts: North Rockland and East Ramapo. (Ms. Reynolds said that when she first moved to Pomona, she lived in a condo complex "that was split right down the middle" between school districts and tax jurisdictions. "At first I couldn't figure this place out," she said, "but now I don't even try to.")

In addition to the public schools, there are several popular private schools in the area, including the Rockland Country Day School in Congers, which has preschool through Grade 5, as well as a middle school and a high school.

Also, there is the Saddle River Day School in Saddle River, N.J., which teaches kindergarten through Grade 12, and the Albertus Magnus High School, a coeducational Catholic school in Bardonia. In nearby New City, the Reuben Gittelman Hebrew Day School offers Jewish education for prekindergarten through Grade 8 as well as a nursery school.

North Rockland High School had a graduating class of 611 last year, with 67 percent going on to four-year colleges and 19 percent enrolling in two-year colleges. On the SATs, the average score for verbal was 475, for math 493 and for writing 472, said Brian D. Monahan, the superintendent of schools.

At Ramapo High School, out of a graduating class of 308, 161 went on to four-year colleges and 132 to two-year colleges. The average SAT scores for that class were 530 for verbal, 579 for

math and 536 for writing, said Jean Fields, the school's principal. Statewide averages were 491, 505 and 482.

The Commute

The Red and Tan Lines provides bus service on weekdays to the Port Authority Bus Terminal from the junction of Pomona Road and Route 45, starting at 4:47 a.m. One-way tickets are \$8.75. A 20-trip ticket, good for two weeks, costs \$143.60. The trip takes about one hour, depending on traffic.

The History

George Washington's soldiers are said to have bivouacked on Camp Hill Road during the Revolution. A short distance to the west of the road is the Ladentown United Methodist Church, built in 1865, and one of the oldest churches still active in the county. The village's original farmhouses, bungalows and Revolutionary War colonials on Old Route 202, Route 306 and Camp Hill Road once drew wealthy people seeking a summer retreat in Pomona.

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